

Tape # 56

## Deb Johnson

*Date: 18 November 1977*

*Mrs. Iris Schwobe talks of Deb Johnson*

*Interviewed by Diedra Northern at 709 West Main, Vernal, Utah.*

Iris: Aunt Deb Johnson's favorite by-word was "by damn." We used to call him Uncle Nels Merkley and he was very religious in Utah. He used to go around as a ward teacher and she said —oh, she had her dinner. She says, "Nels, I'll fix your dinner for you and then I'll sit here and smoke my pipe." He said, "Well, Deb what would you do if you got too poor to buy tobacco?" She said, "Well, by damn, the boys would buy it for me."

Diedra Northern (DN): What did the people think of her smoking a pipe? Did they accept it?

Iris: No. She is the only lady I've ever seen smoke. In the wintertime my brothers would take out a little hand sleigh and go down and bring her up for dinner. Then she used to come up here and play cards. She lived up in Maeser. When her husband died, then she moved down here a block from us. She had a feather bed on her bed and a woven rug, a hand-woven rug on her floor. We used to go down there and clean house for her, my sister and I. Well, we had to take the rug up and put it on the clothesline and beat it with sticks and things to get the dust out and put new straw under it. She wanted straw. But in the summertime it would be so hot. We would say, "Aunt Deb, could we have the door open?" She said, "We don't really need it do we?" She'd open the door and when she thought we were asleep, she'd get up and close it.

DN: Well, why don't you tell me back when you were younger of things you can remember back then?

Iris: I can remember when our house was the only building from here to Fifth West. On the corner of Fifth West and Main we called it the red ?. It belonged to George Johnstun's father and we fought, my father bought this property from Uncle Jake Workman. We said, Uncle Jake, but he wasn't really our uncle. He was a small man who rode a white horse. He had boots and he always tucked his overalls in the tops of his boots.

DN: Is he the one that ran the saloon?

Iris: I don't know. He was a water master and he would come up here and he would always let us ride the horse around.

DN: I was thinking somewhere that he ran a saloon.

Iris: Not that I know of. There was a saloon down in town. Where Zions Bank is, that was Coltharp's Store. Then where Coltharp building ... they called it the Bank of Vernal. Now, the Bank of Vernal sold out to Zions. On the opposite corner was a store by Lycurgus Johnson and his wife, Cora. That's where the First Security is and then they used to call it the Uintah State Bank. Around the corner, Mr. Adams had a store, George Adams. I'm sure they have some

pictures of him. He came here to ? I think he was the telegraph operator for the government, and he married Kate Forest. They always called her "Mother Adams." She was little; small, small features and a short woman. Mr. Adams had the store and we would go out and get three eggs each, my sister and I, take them down to Mr. Adams and trade them for some candy. Mr. Adams always called my mother "Miss Lillie." He says, "Miss Lillie, I'd know your children if I saw them in China. They all look alike."

Then I went to the Central School. First I went to Willcox Academy. I went there until I was in the second grade and then I went to Central. That was the building they tore down and put this other building in its place. I went there and that was in the days when we had a stove in the room. They kept the coal and the wood down in the basement.

Then when I started to teach, I taught over in an old building. It was a three-room brick building. That's when you had to ring the bell and each room had a turn a week, ringing the bell: recess and noon and to dismiss. I taught there and then they built a new building and I taught in that until '48. That's when David was born.

I didn't teach until he was in the third grade and they kept asking me to come as a substitute. I had my degree, I thought I may as well have a regular school. I applied up to Maeser and I taught up there three years. Then I went to Naples for two years. I had to have an upstairs room and it was hard for me to climb the stairs because of this heart condition. I taught to Naples two years. Then I went to Ashley Elementary one year. Then after that I went back down to Central. I taught thirty-one years.

DN: What did you do for fun when you were young girls?

Iris: Oh we used to... There was Wilda Hardy, Elva Davidson, my sister, Bertha, and Helen Banks and Amelia Manker. We used to go on picnics over by the Rock Point Canal. That Wilda was a regular clown and she had a horse and buggy and she had that thing dressed up with a hat on, it's ears sticking through, you know, and we'd go for buggy rides.

But when I taught, once a year the eighth grade boys would challenge the teachers to a ball game, soft ball. We had to really put on the steam just to beat the boys. I said Ralph Hall down here the other day, and I said to him, "Do you remember when we had a foot race?" He said, "Yes." But they had a fountain between the two buildings that was on the outside. He says to me, "Miss White, I can beat you to our room." I ran as fast as I could and I won.

We used to go to the dances. The first year I taught school it was to Randlett. That's how I went down to the Episcopal Church. When I think I was about eight years old, my father took us over to Whiterocks to the Bear Dance. There was a horse and wagon, a team of horses and we went through Lapoint and they had a little, tiny store and they had everything in that thing. But what they couldn't put on the shelves, they had on hooks hanging from the ceiling. But that was the only store they had in LaPoint.

DN: What was the Bear Dance like?

Iris: It was a spring dance. The Indians thought that there was a green elk came down from the mountains and that was supposed to be spring. The women would all be in one line and the men all in another line. There could be as many groups as the Bear Dance ring would hold. You'd go three steps forward and two steps back, three steps forward, two steps back. They had a drum

which they played. They sang, Indians sang, not words, of course, it could have been Indian, but I didn't understand that. It was just a sing-song sort of music.

When I finished the eighth grade at Central I went up to the Uintah Academy. That was when it was an LDS school and during 1916 is when I had this acute inflammatory rheumatism. I had to stay in bed all summer and I had to stay out of school that winter. Dr. Francke came to see me every week of the world and sometimes twice a week. You know what his doctor bill was? Twenty-seven dollars. He was an excellent doctor. He had come here from Idaho.

DN: What did your father do?

Iris: My father was a master carpenter. He had to be an apprentice for three years. The first year, all he got was his board and room. Then the second year he got twenty-five cents a week. Then the third year he got fifty-cents a week. He came from Milwaukee out to Ft. Duchesne when they were building the fort. That's why he came to Utah. My mother went over there when she was fourteen. Her father ran a hotel and she had to help with the cooking and do those things. ... they got married and then they moved to Salt Lake. Then they moved to Logan. Then they came back to Vernal and my Grandfather Britt said, "Don't bring any furniture because the railroad's coming and you can have it shipped on the railroad." But they moved back to Vernal and lived here. My father died when he was eighty-two and my mother passed away when she was ninety-one.

DN: They built this house in 1899?

Iris: Yes, in 1899. They used to live in a house down there where that Chicken King is (southwest corner of 400 West Main). There was a house there and they lived also in house down on Fifth North. Like I said, as soon as my mother got well enough to move, why, they moved into this house. Then when my sister was a ? she passed away...

DN: Tell me about that now.

Iris: She had the scarlet fever and the diphtheria. That was when I don't know but they buried them at night. Atwoods lived across the street where Owen Wall lives. Whenever they wanted anything, why, my father would hang a white rag out on a stick and he'd put the money and Atwoods would do the shopping.

But my mother had twelve children and she raised nine to maturity. Irma was ten years old when she passed away and Russell and Donna were one and a half or two years old. In those days they called it ?, but I think it was nothing by dysentery. They had convulsions, they were awfully sick. Dr. Christy came and when they would have a convulsion, he just plunged them down in a tub of cold water, not their head, you know, just get them out.

DN: Why did he do that?

Iris: I don't know. Just did.

DN: Was there a lot of epidemics then?

Iris: Well, I think one year Emery Johnson's parents, that was the year of the hard winter, I think they lost four children with the diphtheria.

DN: Do you remember that hard winter?

Iris: No. I wasn't born then. I was born in 1902. But the things that are in the history is the things that my mother kept telling me. We used to have open house for her on her birthday, she was born on the seventeenth of March in 1872. She was twelve years younger than my father. Then I always had to write up the articles to put in the *Vernal Express* about her. She'd tell me what to write and I wrote it down.

The first year I taught to Randlett, we used to go up to Gusher and they had this dance hall and it was in what they called, the Strip. This dance hall sloped to the south and you could just glide down there easily. But you had to work to get back up again.

DN: What was the Strip like?

Iris: Everything they used that they used here. Groceries and clothing, material-cloth for anything that they used it all had to be freighted in. Then they also could come on the train to Mack, Colorado, and then it would come by Alhambra and a place like that. Finally, they got cars and you went in the car to Baxter's pass ? I think it is and they had a narrow gauge railroad that just went zig-zag because the mountain was so steep. Then you'd go on the train there to Salt Lake.

DN: How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Iris: Well, it was really difficult because so many people had to work and the first year I taught school I got seventy-two dollars a month. Then they raised it a little bit and then I got ninety a month. That's a lot different than they get now, isn't it? But I still say the teacher does what they are supposed to do. They earn everything that they get. In those days, when I first started to teach, if you were sick, you had to pay the substitute.

DN: Out of your own pocket?

Iris: Yes.

DN: Bet you weren't sick too often, were you?

Iris: The only thing I used to have trouble with was tonsilitis and Dr. Grant(?) took my tonsils out when I got strong enough to have a local anesthetic. After that, I had trouble with sinus. Now, if you're absent, they pay you for so many days of being absent. You are allowed so many days. When we got three thousand dollars a year, we thought we were millionaires.

But during the Depression people they just didn't have it. That's when the WPA came in and people were on welfare. I worked as a welfare worker one summer. Ada Wilhigh (?) was the primary supervisor. She and I worked together in Naples and Davis in Jensen.

DN: What was that like?

Iris: Well you had to take a family history of everyone and see whether they were worthy of welfare. We found out one man had a big herd of cows. He was selling milk and cream and got so much every week from the creamery. We took his name off the list and we lost our job.

DN: What do you mean worthy? Financially?

Iris: Financially. Some people were really deserving. They had no income and no way of making anything, because the crops. There had been a drought and they had no crops and they had no food. They were really worthy but they were just like they are now, there are people getting welfare who do not deserve it.

DN: Did your father farm?

Iris: No, he was always a carpenter. When he charged five dollars a day, people thought they were being robbed.

DN: Did he make good money most of the time?

Iris: He had a job most of the time. Now what do carpenters get? About fifty dollars a day. Of course, in those days you could buy a pair of shoes for two dollars. When you went into the butcher shop for liver, they gave it to you.

DN: Oh, really? Why did they give the liver away?

Iris: I don't know.

DN: Didn't many people like it or eat it?

Iris: Well a lot of people had their own livestock. They killed their own pigs and cows. Of course, everybody had a horse. I liked to read ? like I do now. I would go every day to the library and get two books and we had an orchard where that OK Tire shop was [approximately 789 W. Highway 40]. We had an acre of ground, when the Highway 40 went this way, then that took the orchard. Every day I'd get two books and I'd go up and sit in one of those apple trees and read.

DN: Quiet, wasn't it?

Iris: Yes, my sisters used to get out of patience. They said my mother babied me. But I always had to tend the baby. I had three sisters older than I was. They did the work and I had to tend the baby. This was just a dirt road and we had a baby buggy and was running down the road one day and ...

Well, it still does, but its all piped and that ? out there that you can see, they called that the town ditch. We used to get in old tubs and go up here in and roll around in that water. There

was a sort of wide place where the water was at that time. Then Lyn Atwood lived over there and she would come over and she'd say, "Get out of the ditch so the water will settle so I can do my washing." Because in those days you had to carry every bit of water from the ditch. We didn't have a hydrant, we carried water from the ditch.

DN: You just got the water from the runoff water out here?

Iris: No, it was a good-sized ditch because it went from 1500 West to way down in beyond...  
[There are apparently unintelligible comments here.]

DN: Yeah, it was.

Iris: I remember Mr. Langston, George Langston. When it was his water turn, he would come up and in the summer time when it was good weather, when my father, after he had the stroke, we put him out in a chair on the porch. He had a rocking chair and he could watch the cars and the people. Mr. Langston would come up and sit there and talk to him and watch that no one took his water, turned it off, you know.

DN: Do you remember the Prohibition days?

Iris: Yes, I do.

DN: What can you tell me about those?

Iris: Well, it really didn't concern me very much because we never had liquor in our house. We did have liquor, but sometimes a bottle would last two or three years and about the only thing we ever used it for was—when someone was sick my mother would give you hot toddies. I can't stand the smell of whiskey. Whether you had the headache or the upset stomach, the flu, no matter, it was a hot toddy.

DN: Did it seem to help?

Iris: I don't think so. Afterwards, oh, down here where the IGA is [575 West Main], along there, Archie Richardson built a house. Over here where Sprouse-Reitz is [approximately 690 West Main], in 1911, S. D. Colton built a house, a brick house, that is Hugh Colton's father, and it was [there] a long time. There was no one on the south side of the street.

DN: This house has been standing for a long time.

Iris: Yes it has. It has double floors, double walls, double ceilings. My brother made the storm windows. My brother's also a carpenter and in the summertime we don't need an air conditioner. Soon as the sun comes up, I pull the blinds down, keep the doors closed, and it's nice and cool in here until about five o'clock when I open it up.

DN: Did your father build a lot of the houses?

Iris: Yes. Do you know where Valoras live? He built that house. Oh, he's built a lot of the homes around Vernal. Down where the Antler Motel is [423 W. Main], I think W.S. Henderson lived there and there was a two-story white frame house. The first people I remember living in there was Ed and Mary Harmston. They called her Granny Harmston and she was very dear friend of my mother's. Then when the reservation opened up, They traded that house for one over in Roosevelt. She was the one named Roosevelt, Mary Harmston did. He was the surveyor.

DN: Did you father do a lot of work in Gusher?

Iris: He built the schoolhouse and he built the first Board of Education building that's down there now. Then he also put that addition on the west end for the rest rooms. He did that up to Maeser School, he didn't build the Maeser School. But he built that schoolhouse over to Gusher.

DN: Did you live over there?

Iris: We never lived there. My father worked after one of my younger ? I can't remember whether it was the boy or the girl that passed away. He was working to Myton building a mill, a grist mill, and we went over there and stayed all summer with him.

DN: What's a grist mill?

Iris: Where they grind wheat. Down on Vernal Avenue on Fifth North, is it Utah Power & Light that has that place there?

DN: Yes.

Iris: Well, that was a grist mill, too, and Jimmy Coop was the miller and then they had one up to Maeser, Bill Reynolds had one. It was run by a waterwheel, had a waterwheel to run the mill.

DN: How did that work?

Iris: The canal was there and it just went through the wheel and turned the wheel and that's what turned the machinery in the mill. I think they have a marker up there.

DN: Un-huh, there's a marker up there.

Iris: My father and mother were very good friends of Capt. Dodds and his wife.

DN: Did you know them?

Iris: Very well. On Sunday we used to go over there. They would visit the Dodds' and we would climb the hills. When I taught school, the last week of school, R? Preece drove the school bus. He lived out in Ashley and I would take the whole room, ride on the bus out to R?'s home and then we'd walk over where Steinaker Dam is. We'd climb the hills until it was time for him to go

back and we'd walk back and ride the school bus home. Then in the winter time I used to take my students coasting. We called it the Kabell Hill, that is Fifth North and on the Diamond Mountain road. We would go down there coasting.

DN: Is that something like sleigh riding?

Iris: Yes, each one had their sleigh, or else two would ride the same sleigh.

DN: How were the sleighs made?

Iris: Oh, they were just about this long and that high with the runners on and when it would snow, we would go outside and put on our things and make snowmen.

DN: Were the winters a lot colder then than they are now?

Iris: Oh, eighteen and twenty inches, because I know at school on the school ground, it was the ball diamond in the summer, in the spring and fall. That's where we would go out to make snowmen and the boys could always make a fort and throw snowballs.

DN: How many kids did you usually have in a class room?

Iris: The smallest class I ever had was thirty-one and after that it was forty, forty-two, forty-five students.

DN: Was it hard for one person to handle all of them?

Iris: Well, I was firm, but I was fair and I didn't have favorites. I used to tell them that there's three things you have to do: you have to be mannerly and polite, you have to do your schoolwork, and you have to be quiet. If you don't do that, I have to do something.

DN: What were the disciplinary acts then?

Iris: I used to make them stay in and write multiplication tables. The first year I taught was at Randlett, was third and fourth grade for a while. Then I had fourth grade most the time. At Naples I had fifth grade two years, and Central, I had fifth grade two years. I used to tell the students, I said, "Our own son was never allowed to talk back to a teacher," and I said, "I am not going to take it from you." I said, "I speak to you kindly and politely and I expect that kind of answer."

DN: It's a good way to be.